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# The CIA's Gentlemen Did Read Others' Mail

By Richard Egan

For more than 20 years the Central Intelligence Agency snooped into the mail of Americans. And bit by bit the full extent of "HT Lingual," the CIA's code name for the mail-intercept program, seems to be coming to light.

Last June the Rockefeller Commission, in its report on CIA domestic activities, recounted the origin and history of the mail-intercept operation, which the commission said was limited to mail coming from or going to Russia and other Communist countries. Last week Sen. Frank Church, chairman of a Senate committee investigating the CIA, reported that the CIA opened the mail of three well-known institutions and nine prominent Americans, including a 1958 letter sent to then-Presidential aspirant Richard Nixon.

Later this month the Senate committee will hold hearings on HT Lingual, and committee aides raise the prospect of yet more disclosures. The mail of "a lot of prominent people" apparently was opened by CIA agents, said an aide to the Senate committee. And, he told The Observer, there is evidence that the CIA operation was not confined to mail flowing between other countries and the United States; but that CIA

agents also poked into mail flowing between points in the United States.

Church's disclosure likely will give added impetus to the demands for stronger outside controls over the CIA. Decrying the CIA's "lack of accountability," Church said, "It is obvious that in the opening of mail they have gone very far afield indeed." The Idaho Democrat was one of those whose mail was opened. Sen. Hubert Humphrey was another. The former Vice President denounced the CIA operation as "a prime example of bureaucratic arrogance, violation of law, invasion of privacy, and abuse of power."

In a statement at the opening of a hearing of his Select Senate Committee on Intelligence, Church disclosed that the CIA had opened the mail of "selected American politicians." He said the intelligence agency "regularly opened and scrutinized" the mail of himself; Nixon; Humphrey; Sen. Edward Kennedy; Arthur F. Burns, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board; Rep. Bella Abzug of New York; John D. Rockefeller IV, former West Virginia secretary of state; and the late Martin Luther King, Jr., and his widow, Coretta. The Abzug mail opening had been revealed earlier. The CIA also pried into the mail of Harvard University and the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, Church said.

Church said none of the nine individuals was on the CIA watch list for the mail-cover operation. The watch list usually included the names of about 300 Americans and foreigners whose mail was scrutinized by the CIA for intelligence purposes.

Committee aides later backed off from Church's statement that the mail of the nine individuals he named was "regularly" opened. "We know of at least one letter involving each of them and we have a feeling there were more," said a committee aide. He said, too, that the committee didn't know whether the nine individuals were targets of the CIA or whether the CIA opened the mail for other reasons.

Members of the Rockefeller Commission staff said they were aware that mail of prominent persons was involved in the CIA operation but thought the matter too "insignificant" to include in the report. The CIA "ran a regular vacuum-cleaner operation involving millions of pieces of mail," says Harold A. Baker, a Champaign, Ill., lawyer who investigated the mail-intercept program for the Rockefeller Commission. "We came across the names of prominent individuals, but we did not think there was any deliberate attempt by the CIA to pick out their mail. It was incidental to the CIA's intelligence-gathering operation. The intercept was not directed against the prominent persons."

Robert B. Olsen of Des Moines, Iowa, served, like Baker, as senior counsel to the Rockefeller Commission. Says Olsen, who was not involved in the inquiry into the mail-intercept operation: "It is my impression that the staff and commission members were aware of the fact that the operation probably included the mail of prominent people. There was no attempt to scan the names of those involved."

Baker said that to his knowledge the CIA watch list contained the names of no prominent persons. And he said he had seen no evidence that the CIA opened any domestic U.S. mail. "If there had been any evidence, I would have insisted that it be included in the report."

The CIA mail-intercept program began in 1952 and lasted until 1973, according to the Rockefeller Commission report. The major operation was conducted in New York City, with smaller programs for brief periods of time carried out in San Francisco, New Orleans, and Honolulu. In 1972 CIA agents in New York examined the outsidings of 2.3 million pieces of mail sent to and from Communist countries, photographed 33,000 envelopes, and opened 8,700 letters.

At the Church committee hearing, James Angleton, retired CIA chief of counterintelligence and head of the mail-intercept operation for most of its life, acknowledged that the program violated Federal laws, but nevertheless defended it. "From a counterintelligence point of view, we believed it was extremely important to know any possible contacts of American citizens with Communist countries," he said. Angleton insisted that the program "had nothing to do with impinging on or harming Americans." But when asked why the CIA poked into the mail of prominent Americans, Angleton said he would prefer to answer the question at a closed committee meeting rather than at a public session.